



Paul H. Wright

**BEHIND THE**

**BIBLE'S**

**GREATEST**

**STORIES**

Exploring the Culture, Context,  
and History of Famous Stories

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and History of Famous Stories

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*Behind the Bible's Greatest Stories:  
Exploring the Culture, Context, and History of Famous Stories*

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Published by Rose Publishing  
An imprint of Tyndale House Ministries  
Carol Stream, Illinois  
rose-publishing.com

ISBN: 978-1-4964-8808-4

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Names: Wright, Paul H., Dr author

Title: Behind the Bible's greatest stories : exploring the culture, context, and history of famous stories / Paul H Wright.

Description: First. | Carol Stream, Illinois : Rose Publishing, [2025] |

Summary: Commentary for adult readers on seven popular Bible stories from the Old Testament with study questions to facilitate group discussion”- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2024038720 | ISBN 9781496488084 paperback

Subjects: LCSH: Bible stories | Bible. Old Testament--Commentaries

Classification: LCC BS546 .W745 2025 | DDC 220.95/05--dc23/eng

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024038720>

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Printed in China

December 2024, 1st printing

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# INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS BOOK IS about Bible stories. But make no mistake: the stories we will explore are not the ones that sometimes are inflated into tabloid fare or inhabit obscure, less-visited portions of the Bible. No, these are the same stories we once read, or had read to us, as children. Noah and the ark. Moses and the exodus from Egypt. Ruth and Boaz. David and Goliath. Jonah and the whale (or, if you prefer, the big fish). Familiar fare all—or is it?

For centuries the Bible has been the world's most enduring book—and for good reason. It is, first and foremost, inspired Scripture, revealing God's plan of salvation to everyone. But the Bible is also enduring because it is endearing. It speaks to everyone regardless of who we are, our age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, economic status, political persuasion, or social standing, where we live or the century in which we live. And perhaps the most widely known and memorable portions of the Bible are its stories.

Many of the people whom we meet on the pages of Scripture are big characters, familiar to us in their basic storylines. But let's not say, "I've read these stories already" and hurry on to something else. For when we peer a bit deeper, we see that none of the beloved stories of the Bible are quite as simple as they once seemed to us—or perhaps as they still do. In fact, the stories of Scripture are weighty, with characters all too real who act, sometimes, with great faith, but often with the same flaws that plague people everywhere—all laid open and exposed for the world to read. We tend to want to sanitize our favorite Bible characters, make excuses for

them (usually through twenty-first century priorities), put halos on them, or rescue them from themselves. It's harder to read their stories and just let them be—juicy details and all.

Because much of the Bible is story, we ought to read with an eye for things that make for good literature: motives and plot; the voice of the narrator and the voices of the characters; foreshadowing, suspense, reversal, and climax; what is said, what is not said, and what is implied. But because these stories record historical events, we should also read them as windows into things that actually happened. As we do, we wonder how we might uncover some of the details about the backstory, information that the authors don't provide. We might also ask what was happening at the time the stories were written that prompted them to be recorded at all.

What we have are records of events, written as stories, in sacred Scripture. Some readers might be happier if the Bible recorded events as cut and dried news accounts, with careful attention to the five *Ws*. This might satisfy our urge for knowledge of facts but would probably leave us out of the report (“I'm glad that didn't happen to me!”). Stories draw us in, prompting us to interact and join the drama. They also encourage us to interpret, and this opens the reading process to all manner of response to the claims of the text. Most scholars welcome the task, finding the authority for what the text means in the one reading it. The danger, of course, is that the story then becomes whatever the reader wants it to be. But we are reading divine Scripture and so ought to strive to search out the intent of its authors (and, of course, the divine Author) in whose hands the meaning of the stories resides. The Bible's stories are written for our instruction (2 Tim. 3:16); this is what the word *Torah* means. But rather than providing a list of tight precepts for life, they teach by vivid example.

As we read, the page becomes awash in real life. Inquisitive as we are, we begin to think deeply and to ask questions. Some of our questions are of the “But what actually happened?” type. How big, for instance, was the flood? Where did Moses cross the Red Sea? What did Noah's ark actually look like? What did it take to survive a famine in the ancient world? How many Ninevites actually repented at the words of Jonah? And so on. Things like these we want to know, even if the answers sometimes

challenge how we already understand the events of biblical history to have been.

More difficult but equally important are the “But why that way?” questions. Why did Bible people choose to do what they did? What were their intentions and motives? To answer “Because they listened to God” or “Because they were evil” may be right morally and neat theologically, but it doesn’t probe very deeply into how conflicted we know people actually are. Motives are often unstated in the biblical storylines, giving readers like us a chance to ferret out reasonable suggestions based on the literary and cultural data available to us, including what we know of the human condition. What did Boaz have to gain by marrying Ruth, a Moabite? Why did Jonah run? Why did Esther agree to enter the pagan king’s harem? Could she have said, “Thanks, but no thanks” to the king? What prompted Goliath and his Philistine cohorts to penetrate into Judean territory through the Elah Valley? And why, when they did, did David’s father care enough to send his sons down to hold the line? We don’t ask questions like these to cast doubt on the biblical accounts but to seek out the whys.

Asking questions helps us think about details not mentioned in biblical stories, details that seem to have been obvious to the writers. Here our search for answers usually takes us to information supplied by cultural studies, archaeology, geography, and written documents from the ancient world other than the Bible. But even so, we must keep in mind that for every insight these aids provide, another question pops up that we likely hadn’t thought of yet. And herein lies the root of a host of genuine debates by Bible readers—scholarly and otherwise—about what actually *did* happen in the events that the Bible records as stories. It’s easy to read our own context into the actions and motives of the people of the Bible or into the intentions of their authors. It’s more difficult to let them act, or write, on their own terms and learn from them rather than mold their thoughts, actions, and motives according to our own understanding of what must have happened and why. Trying to see life the way that the characters and authors of the Bible saw it is one of the most difficult—yet rewarding—parts of reading Bible stories.

Another set of questions prompts us to ask why, or in what way, later biblical authors referred to earlier Bible stories as they wrote their own books that also became Scripture. How, we might ask, did they understand these events? The epistles of Peter, for instance, mention Noah as an illustration of divine judgment yet to come (1 Peter 3:18–22; 2 Peter 2:5; 3:5–6). Several of the psalms sing about Moses and God’s triumph in the exodus, reminding Israel that God will continue to be faithful to them as he was to their ancestors (Pss. 68, 77, 78, 80, 81, 99, 105, 106, 114, 135, 136). The prophets, too, encourage Israel to live in ways that are faithful with what it means to be redeemed by appealing to the exodus and wilderness wanderings (Isa. 43:16–20; Ezek. 20:5–10). The book of Proverbs speaks about a “worthy woman,” a “woman of noble character” (Prov. 12:4; 31:10). This phrase is used only one other time in the Bible, to describe Ruth (Ruth 3:11). While we are not sure if the book of Ruth was written before Proverbs or vice versa, it is clear that the description of each of these two women helps us understand the other. Bible stories are not meant to be read in isolation from each other or from the rest of Scripture. The primary context for understanding Scripture is Scripture itself. And so as we read, it is worth asking what themes or ideas biblical authors choose to emphasize as they reflect on what earlier biblical stories taught *them*—and what they want to teach us as a result.

This process of reflection hasn’t stopped. Bible stories, with loads of fodder for rumination, have been told and retold, shaped and reshaped, adapted, and, yes, even (and eagerly) changed over the centuries. Novelists, bards, musicians, playwrights, pundits, and preachers—not to mention the rest of us—have pulled phrases, characters, and themes off the pages of the Bible and inserted them into a wide variety of songs, sermons, literature, theater productions, movies, commentary, and bedtime stories, all for better and worse.<sup>1</sup> Many of our images of Moses are courtesy of Cecil B. DeMille, and David versus Goliath has become a “little guy beats city hall” idiom. We don’t have to look very far to see how the collective heritage of modern culture uses Bible stories to support just about every agenda humanly possible, again for better or worse. All of this can be interesting, but it is more a study of literary malleability, creative history writing, and

selective life application than it is reading Bible stories within their own context. It all has value, but in this book we prefer to start with the words of the English hymn writer William Henry Parker, written for his Sunday school students nearly one and a half centuries ago:

*Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear,  
things I would ask him to tell me if he were here:  
Scenes by the wayside, tales of the sea,  
stories of Jesus, tell them to me.*

“Things I would ask him to tell me if he were here.” That would be eyewitness accounts, and some of the Bible’s authors purport to do exactly that. Their words need to be taken seriously within their own contexts as we strive to find significance in them for our lives today.

Many of the questions prompted by Bible stories are personal, making us think deeply about God, ourselves, and others. How might we best respond to God’s claims on our lives, given the complex world in which we live? One helpful way is to see ourselves as one of the characters in a Bible story—and not just the saintly ones. How am I like David, Jonah, or Ruth—or Goliath? As we do, we must keep in mind that it is not fair to expect the people whose stories we read to have the same insights, moral stamina, or theological correctness that we, the readers, have (or think we have), knowing the end of the story before we begin. But if we cut David, Jonah, or Ruth, or even Goliath, some slack as they make their ways through the drama of their lives, we just might be better able to gaze inwardly with more clarity for the effort. One of the best ways that Bible stories invite us in is by leaving us at the door, standing, waiting, in suspense. The book of Jonah, for instance, ends with a question posed by God to the prophet: “Should I not also have compassion on Nineveh?” (Jonah 4:11 NASB). We don’t know how Jonah answered, but by not telling us, the author invites us all to ask and then answer the same question for ourselves.

But perhaps the most difficult questions that arise from reading Bible stories are the moral and ethical ones. Are we really to believe that *everyone* deserves to drown in the flood except Noah and his family? Why

doesn't Joseph reveal himself to his brothers the first time he sees them in Egypt, rather than act in ways that increase their distress and the distress of his father? Is what Mordecai and Queen Esther do to the Persians justified? Bible characters (even the good ones) tend to try to make a go of things based on what life deals them. (Don't we all.) If they ask God for anything, it is usually to help them do whatever it is they've already planned. Is this the way it's supposed to work when life gets in the way of living? Jacob spends many years of his life believing that his beloved son was ripped to pieces by a wild beast. Naomi loses her entire family in a foreign land. How is that fair? These are difficult questions to raise in Bible storybooks written for children; they're even harder to face once asked by adults. We already know that life is complex. Recognizing complexity in Bible stories makes them more real as we struggle with complexities in our own lives.

As we read through the Bible's stories, we'll see things in them that prompt us to ask difficult questions. Those questions will come to us like Whack-a-Mole: suddenly, unexpectedly; and our answers do sometimes miss. In this book, we won't have time to address everything that pokes up its head—and in any case you will have other questions as you read on your own. I'll suggest answers only sometimes; they may or may not be satisfying to you. But in reading and asking, together we will also learn many things. Mostly, I imagine we would like to learn how to respond better to the claims God has on our lives. His words, preserved for us in Bible stories, are available. And they are meant to be reread. Reading the Bible was never meant to be a one and done. Rather, borrowing words from C. S. Lewis, it is an exercise of going “further up and further in.”<sup>2</sup>

I lived in Jerusalem for a quarter century, teaching Bible in context to students who had come to the Holy City from around the world. One of my colleagues was Michael McGarry, head of a Christian study center outside of Bethlehem. Michael is fond of saying, “Tourists who visit the land of Israel differ from pilgrims who make the same journey. Tourists travel through the land; pilgrims allow the land—the locus of God's revelation—to travel through them. Or, to say it differently, tourists ask questions about the land; pilgrims allow the land to ask questions of

them.” We can say the same thing about those of us who read the Bible, wherever we are. Sometimes we read the Bible as tourists, traveling along its pages and asking questions about what the information found there means. Other times we read as pilgrims, allowing the Bible to work its way through us—asking, compelling, cajoling, and challenging all the way. But one thing that we ought not to do is somehow hope that as we read our way through its pages, the Bible will come alive. According to Hebrews 4:12, the Bible *already* is alive: it’s “living and active.” Rather, we read the Bible so that *it* can enliven *us*. That’s the end goal of a journey in reading that is worth taking.

## Notes

- 1 For examples, see David Lyle Jeffrey, gen. ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Eerdmans, 1992).
- 2 C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (Collier Books, 1970), 165. Lewis uses the phrase to describe our ever-growing knowledge and fulfillment of heaven once we enter eternal life.



## Chapter 1

# THE STORY OF

# NOAH

Genesis 6:9–9:29

**T**HE STORY OF Noah is so well known that even those of us who are otherwise totally unfamiliar with the Bible resonate with its characters, the animals, and, of course, the ark. But what for many has become just a cute children's tale is already in the earliest chapters of the Bible a pivotal narrative revealing something fundamental about the nature of people and of God. The story fills nearly a third of the primeval (pre-Abraham) history recorded in Genesis. For this reason, it is difficult to treat it as a stand-alone account and still grasp the full impact of the consequences of the flood, God's means of salvation through the ark, and our response. Indeed, the story of Noah is a story for people of all ages, and the older and more biblically astute we grow, the more perplexing, demanding, and compelling it becomes.

Details about the extent of the flood, the size of the ark, the number and kind of animals on board, and Noah's subsequent drunkenness are all interesting parts of the narrative, but they are not its primary message. Rather, Noah's ark and the flood are the frame that allows the message of the story to be seen. Through the details of the Noah story we are able to glimpse something tangible about who God is and what his relationship with creation, especially people, entails.

The truths about the character of God and people are magnified when we compare Noah's story with other ancient Near Eastern stories of floods sent by gods to destroy humanity. These stories reflect the

polytheistic worldview out of which God called Noah to save humanity—and then later Abraham to be a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1–3). The flood stories from Mesopotamia are parts of longer compositions that speak about the gods and their unfavorable attitude toward people. They seem to have been written to justify the actions of kings or priests wanting to subdue the commotion of their own noisy subjects.

- A Sumerian story tells of Ziusudra, a pious king who overheard a plan of the gods to destroy humankind by a flood. Ziusudra saved himself in a boat and offered a sacrifice to the gods after the flood; then he was given eternal life.
- The Old Babylonian Atra-hasis epic relates how the gods sent a seven-day flood to silence people on an over-crowded earth from making noise that bothered them. Atra-hasis was saved by building a reed boat and taking some animals with him.
- The Babylonian Gilgamesh epic includes a flood story telling how Utnapishtim escaped a seven-day flood sent by the gods, ostensibly to punish people. This so-called “Babylonian Noah” took all living things with him onto a reed boat sealed with pitch to ride out the flood, which came as a violent thunderstorm. Utnapishtim used birds to check if the water had receded and offered a sacrifice upon disembarking; then he was given eternal life by the gods. (This is the most complete Mesopotamian flood story.)



Gilgamesh Epic, Tablet 11, which mentions Utnapishtim's flood

Because these flood stories have many similar details, scholars often conclude that they are local variations of a common memory, tracing them

to an original story about the king of Shuruppak, a prominent city in southern Mesopotamia.

Together, these versions show us that the polytheistic worldview of ancient Mesopotamia was a belief system which differed widely in essential ways from the revelation of God that is recorded in the Bible. For the pagan world, the flood was an event caused by capricious deities intent on protecting their own comfort and interests. In the Gilgamesh epic, the gods even hid their coming judgment from people so as to try to not give anyone a chance to survive. In the Bible, the flood is an act of moral judgment followed by grace with the intent of restoring wholeness, fellowship, and peace between people and God. Even though Noah's story and the Mesopotamian flood stories share some similarities (not surprising since they're from the same ancient geographical location), there are significant foundational differences about God's character and his relationship with people that we read in the biblical account, things that are lacking in flood stories of the nations from whom God chose to redeem people.

### The Ancient Near East (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC)



## Themes in the Story of Noah

### **God exists, is sovereign, and has the right to govern creation in any way that he sees fit.**

We see this theme in two ways.

Firstly, even though the story of the flood tells us many things that Noah did, it is not a story about him but about God. Nor is this primarily a story about God sending a flood but about why he saves Noah. The answer has to do with Noah's character, and we can infer something about that from his actions in the story. Like Adam and Enoch, Noah "walked with God" and was "a righteous man, blameless in his generation" (Gen. 6:9; cf. Gen. 3:8; 5:24; Ezek. 14:14, 20). And while the story does not mention why God considers Noah to be righteous (is it his actions or attitude?), Noah's character is proven to be such as the events of his story unfold. "He did all," we read repeatedly, "that God commanded him" (Gen. 6:22; cf. 7:5, 9, 16). Yet strangely enough, Noah himself never says anything in the biblical text. As a result, we lack Noah's own voice about the situation of his day, his inmost hopes and fears, and even his own motives and attitudes for doing what he did. It is only much later that the writer of Hebrews gives us a clue: Noah acted "by faith" and "in reverent fear"; that is, his faith was proven to be valid by his actions, which were done with all due reverence and respect to God (Heb. 11:7). Because Noah never speaks, we must consider him a silent character, someone who acts but is not the one driving the action. The one who does speak, and at all the key moments, is God—even to the extent of providing blueprints for the ark (Gen. 6:14–16). Throughout, it is God's words that hold power, express revelation, and define who Noah is and what he will become.

Secondly, we see that God is sovereign because the flood is depicted as a reversal of creation. In Genesis 1, God separates the chaotic waters of the cosmic deep so that dry ground appears, ground that becomes fertile and full of life as the days of creation unfold. God calls this created land "good"—that is, a place suitable for humans to live (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). With the flood, a few chapters later in Genesis, the mass of waters

again overwhelms the earth, taking away fertile ground and the possibility of life with it. The God who chooses to create can also choose to de-create if he so wishes (Jer. 4:23–26; 2 Peter 3:5–7).

### **Humans fail in their responsibility to live in righteous, helpful ways before God and others.**

God plants the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the middle of the garden of Eden, then prohibits Adam and Eve from eating from it so that they (and we) will understand that it is God the creator, not people, who determine what is good for human life (Gen. 2:9; 3:5). But Eve, and then Adam, do indeed eat, and ever since then the natural tendency to choose what is wrong instead of what is right has been a principal attribute of what it means to be human (Gen. 3:1–24; Jer. 17:5–10).

The story of Noah displays the full force of human depravity: the consequence of wanting to usurp the rights and character of God (Gen. 3:22; 6:5). On the question, “Are people inherently good or evil?” the story of Noah clearly teaches the latter. Just a few generations from creation, the earth and all its people are already “corrupt ... and ... filled with violence” (Gen. 6:11–12). These are words that reveal the rapid advancement of sin in all contexts: things affecting the body, mind, and spirit; things both done and left undone; things of the individual; things of society; and things of the world.

### **Judgment of human sin is certain, and it reveals a significant part of the character of God.**

Writing much later, after Israel has been exiled to Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel declares that even if God had sent Noah, Daniel, and Job to Jerusalem, these men would have been able to save only themselves since they, and no one else, was righteous in their day (Ezek. 14:14, 20). For Ezekiel, the flood is seen as a forerunner of the judgment of God on the kingdom of Judah of his day. But the judgment of the flood also foreshadows an even greater judgment by God at the end of time (Matt. 24:36–39; 2 Peter 2:1–10; 3:3–7). As we begin working our way through

the Bible with the accounts of Genesis, we might think it rather unfair that the whole thing opens on such a stark note. But the biblical authors know life too well to pull punches or offer a goody-goody hope to their readers. God's right to judge pervades the message of the Bible, yes, but it is always accompanied by the reality of his grace and willingness to save, even if it be only a faithful remnant like the family of Noah.

## **We need to wait for God to act.**

Though not always explicitly stated in Genesis, the timeline of the flood implies that Noah and his family, a remnant of only eight people out of everyone on earth, repeatedly wait for God to act:

- they wait for the rain to start after the door of the ark is closed (Gen. 7:9–10);
- they wait for the waters of the flood to subside after the rain has stopped (Gen. 8:1–5);
- they wait as a raven and then a dove take flight to see if the land can support life yet (Gen. 8:6–12); and
- they wait for God's command before coming out of the ark (Gen. 8:13–19).

In the face of the persistent question, “Why is God silent in an enraged world?,” the story of Noah demonstrates that God knows the right time to act (1 Peter 3:20). He also knows the extent to which he must act. The picture of a faithful remnant waiting for God, a God who often seems to remain behind the scenes, sets the tone for later stories about his people waiting for deliverance: those under the bondage of pharaoh in Egypt (Ex. 2:23–25); the remnant of Israel in exile in Babylon (Lam. 3:26); the psalmist imploring a silent God (Pss. 37:34; 38:15; 40:1); and believers waiting for the coming of the divine Messiah, the Son of Man, who will set the world aright (Matt. 24:36–44). Jesus compares the coming of the Son of Man to the days of Noah: “Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and

marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:26–27). God withholds his hand of judgment for such a long time that people act as if it will never come. God’s reticence to act quickly is not a measure of his indifference or inability to act, but of his grace.

## **The hope of salvation is certain—and with it the ability to start over.**

The writer of Genesis says that “the LORD was sorry that He had made mankind” (Gen. 6:6 NASB), but he also notes that Noah’s father names his son Noah because he will “bring ... relief” to a toilsome world (Gen. 5:28–29). The Hebrew verbs “to be sorry” and “to bring relief” both come from the same root (*n-u-h*), which in essence means “to be moved to pity.” The name Noah may come from the same root or from a different Hebrew root that means “to rest, be at rest, or settle down” (*n-h-m*). Both meanings are reflected in the story, and like so many biblical characters, Noah is aptly named.

And so the story of Noah begins with hope, found in God’s choice of someone who will be delivered because of his righteousness and obedience. This introduces a wonderfully persistent biblical theme: there is a faithful remnant that God saves from judgment (Isa. 10:20–23; 46:3–4; 2 Chron. 36:22–23; Rom. 11:5–6). The first epistle of Peter compares the flood to the waters of baptism, which also signal salvation to a new life (1 Peter 3:18–22).

In the story of Noah, new life—and with it the ability to start over—is carefully depicted as a second creation (being “created again,” as it were), setting the world back to the way it was first supposed to be:

- God pushes the waters away by a *ruah*, translated “Spirit” in the creation account of Genesis 1:2 and “wind” as the flood recedes in Genesis 8:1.
- The birds and animals that exit the ark are described in ways that remind us of the categories of birds and animals at creation (Gen. 1:20–25; 8:17, 19).

- God reiterates that people will still have authority—we should assume respectful, not malicious or manipulative, authority—over all animals, birds, and fish (Gen. 1:26–29; 9:2–4).
- Even after the flood, people are still made in the image of God, with the mandate to be fruitful, multiply, and increase upon the earth (Gen. 1:22, 27–28; 8:17; 9:1, 6–7).
- In creation, God plants a garden (Gen. 2:8), and after the flood, Noah plants a vineyard—a type of garden in a world renewed (Gen. 9:20). Both are places of life and blessing; both become the setting of sin.

## Events in the Story of Noah

### The Coming Storm GENESIS 6:9–22

**God tells Noah to build the ark in order to survive a flood which will destroy all human and animal life on the earth. He then tells Noah how to make the ark and to bring animals and food on board. Noah does as God commands.**

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The story of Noah begins with a plan—not Noah’s plan but God’s. The Lord reveals to Noah the coming calamity, and he explains what Noah should do to survive it. Then the narrator tells us, simply, “Noah did this” (Gen. 6:22). What the storyteller does not tell us is exactly when Noah begins to build the ark, how he gains the necessary engineering expertise to do so, who helps him (if anyone), how he can afford to build it, or how long it takes to do so. The popular suggestions that Noah and his sons were ridiculed by their neighbors and that Noah spent time warning people far and wide about God’s upcoming judgment appear only in Jewish and Christian texts from the time of the New Testament or later.<sup>1</sup> The epistle of 2 Peter, roughly contemporary to many of these, calls Noah “a herald of righteousness” but provides no details to explain the phrase (2 Peter 2:5).

In Noah's story, the Hebrew word for ark, *tevah*, is an Egyptian loan word that means "chest." This word is used in only one other place in the Bible: for the closed basket in which the infant Moses is placed to float safely in the waters of the Nile (Ex. 2:3–6; the word for the *ark* of the covenant is a different term: *'aron*). Noah's ark is made of *gopher* wood, a Hebrew term that is understood to be either cypress, oak, cedar, willow, or a different wood altogether—the particular kind remains a matter of debate. Like the papyrus ark that cradles Moses in the Nile, the joints of Noah's ark are sealed with pitch (bitumen). Some scholars have suggested that the timbers and planks of Noah's ark were sewn together by fiber ropes rather than fastened with pegs, a boatbuilding practice known in ancient Egypt and attested along the Indian Ocean for thousands of years.

The dimensions of the ark are given in cubits, a unit of length that varied in the ancient world but was approximately 18 inches (46 cm). The ark was 300 cubits (450 ft; 130 m) long, 50 cubits (75 ft; 23 m) wide, and 30 cubits (45 ft; 13.5 m) high, giving a length to width dimension of 6:1, which is considered to be the dimension for a stable vessel today. The ark was significantly larger than any other known vessel in the ancient world or, for that matter, any boat until the late nineteenth century AD.

Genesis 6:16 is a difficult verse to translate: "Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above, and set the door of the ark in its side. Make it with lower, second, and third decks." This is usually taken to indicate that the ark had a single door in the hull, a row of relatively small windows just under the roofline, and three decks containing rooms. The Babylonian Talmud, a Jewish legal document dating to the early sixth century AD that codified centuries of oral tradition, reports that the bottom deck held manure, the middle deck was for animals, and the top deck provided



**Building the Ark**  
(James Tissot, c. 1896-1902)

living space for people.<sup>2</sup> This is as good an estimation of floor use as any suggestion since.

## The Animals GENESIS 7:1–9

**Noah, his family, two pairs of every unclean animal  
and seven pairs of every clean animal enter the ark.  
Noah is 600 years old.**

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In Genesis 7, we find a curious detail about the animals Noah takes into the ark: he brings more “clean” animals than “not clean” ones (vv. 2–3). According to Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:4–20, clean animals are those that are suitable (kosher) for sacrifice in the temple and for human consumption. But why the distinction between clean and unclean animals already in the story of Noah? How does Noah know which animals are clean, since he lives long before the instructions of Leviticus and Deuteronomy?<sup>3</sup> Noah is not given any restrictions after the flood regarding which animals are suitable as food (“*Every* moving thing that lives shall be food for you,” Gen. 9:3, emphasis added). Nothing in the story tells us that Noah understands why God makes this distinction between clean and unclean animals as cargo (we certainly cannot expect him to have anticipated future regulations for sacrifice). Rather, it all seems to be another example of Noah’s obedience to God’s command, whether he fully understood the *why* behind the command or not.

The story of Noah does not provide details about any of the practical considerations regarding the animals, birds, and “every creeping thing of the ground” that are in the ark. Questions—and speculations—abound:

- The animals, birds, and creeping things are “according to its kind” (Gen. 6:19–20). Because we do not know if *kind* refers to species or a different category of animals, we cannot know how many animals in total are on the ark. The word *kind* is also used in the first chapter of Genesis to describe the animals, birds, and creeping things that God made on days five and six of creation (Gen. 1:21,

24). This helps us see the flood as a reversal and then a renewal of creation.

- There is no indication as to the actual process by which the animals come to Noah, especially those living excessively far away (Gen. 6:20; 7:8–9, 15). Nor should we expect them to enter the ark in a neat double column, pair after docile pair, as picture books so richly illustrate.
- How might the animals be kept healthy (other than fed; Gen. 6:21) and docile, especially the non-domesticated ones? Are eight people—Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives—enough to care for all of them?
- How old are the animals? Apparently old enough and sufficiently healthy, once the waters subside, to reproduce.
- Did any reproduce or perish during the journey?



Noah Leading the Animals into the Ark (Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, c. 1645)

Silence in the story about these and other questions has led to many suggestions and dramatizations about the menagerie of Noah's ark. As early as the end of the first millennium BC, Jewish texts, followed by the early church fathers, elaborated the story to fill in some of the blanks. For instance, the Babylonian Talmud offers fanciful stories under the memory of a supposed eyewitness: "We experienced great suffering in the ark caring for the animals"—feeding by day those that eat by day and feeding by night those that eat by night. The lion, the Talmud tells us, had a fever and so wouldn't eat for a week, giving some relief to the overburdened caregivers, while the phoenix(!) said that it would help by dying and then coming back to life as the ark landed.<sup>4</sup> The church father Augustine of Hippo wondered if perhaps Noah brought additional animals onto the ark to serve as food for the carnivores (he mentions lions and eagles in particular) or if he brought some sort of meat substitute instead. Augustine also wondered if provision for the lions and eagles was something that Noah thought of or if God specifically told him to do it.<sup>5</sup> The point is not so much what Augustine suggested, but that he, too, pondered questions that the story itself does not clearly answer. More recently, some interpreters have suggested that the animals hibernated in the ark or didn't eat much because they were small (though for most of the animal kingdom a year's growth—the length of time that everyone is aboard—is quite substantial). Others suggest that the land surface of the earth differed before the flood, making it easier to collect animals from places now separated by water, irrespective of the speed of movement. (Maybe the sloths got a head start.)

Nothing in the biblical text is said about fish, even though a massive flood would have wreaked havoc with saltwater and freshwater habitats. Nor is anything said about plants, most of which would have been destroyed by the flood as well, or how they sprang back to life after a full year's inundation. But one thing the story does provide is a very exact reckoning of the passage of time from one event to another, more so than any other story in the Bible. In doing so, it anchors in real time events that otherwise seem larger than life. Yet the dates in the story are not given according to a system with specific month names keyed to an

established civilization but are instead reckoned according to Noah's age: "Noah was six hundred years old when ..." (Gen. 7:6; cf. Gen. 5:32; 7:11; 8:13). This suggests that Noah can be viewed as the founder of a new humanity, practically as well as morally.

### NOAH'S LONG LIFE

Genesis records that Noah lived 950 years (Gen. 9:29), while his father Lamech lived 777 years (Gen. 5:31) and his grandfather Methuselah, 969 years (Gen. 5:27). Scholars have offered several suggestions for the long lifespans of people born prior to the flood. While some accept these numbers at face value, others suggest that they represent the length of family lines, are literary exaggerations, or reflect different methods of counting, such as using base 6 rather than base 10 as is standard for computation today.<sup>6</sup> Whatever it was, Genesis indicates that lifespans gradually shortened in the generations following the flood (Gen. 11:10–26).

## The Fountains of the Deep GENESIS 7:10–24

**After waiting on the battened-down ark for seven days, rain falls for forty days and forty nights. The ensuing flood covers the earth for 150 days.**

With Noah, his family, and the animals securely inside the ark, the flood starts when "all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened," and this continues for "forty days and forty nights" (Gen. 7:11–12). Forty is a common number for indicating intervals of time in the Bible: for example, the three phases of Moses's life; the time of wilderness wanderings; the length of peace after each judge; the years of the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon; and the days of Jesus's temptation. This pattern suggests that forty may be a round or approximate number for reckoning time or used symbolically.

Genesis 7:19 tells us that “the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered.” It is possible to explain the presence of subterranean waters sufficient for a flood that covers the highest mountains on earth to a depth of 15 cubits (20 ft; 6 m; Gen. 7:20) and the waters disappearing after the flood only if we assume that there was a very different geological structure prior to the flood than is present today, as some interpreters do. While many interpreters hold that certain geological features of the earth today were caused by a massive flood in ancient times, most portions of the globe show no evidence of significant flooding and much of the earth’s geological structure (such as stratification) cannot be explained adequately by a single flood. In any case, arguments for a worldwide flood based on geology are strongest if the existence of current geological structures cannot be explained by any other means.

A few cities in Mesopotamia, where scholars usually suggest Noah might have lived, show archaeological evidence of having been inundated by a massive flood (e.g., Ur, Uruk, Shuruppak, Lagash, Kish, and Nineveh), though at different times over the fourth and third millennia BC. This is not surprising since these cities lay in the flood plain of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Most ancient cities in the area, however, reveal no

indication of having been flooded, nor do the vast majority of ancient cities around the globe. For this reason, archaeological evidence for a worldwide flood is lacking.

By some calculations there are nearly three hundred flood stories from across the globe. Most come from the Pacific Islands, Australia, the Americas, and some parts of Asia, with a few from Africa and Europe. It



Tigris River and flood plain, Iraq

is possible to emphasize items of similarity between them and conclude that they point to a worldwide flood. It is also possible to maintain that they cannot point to a single event because they differ widely in many

significant details. In any case, since devastating local floods were a common occurrence, it is only reasonable that memory of at least some of them would have been preserved in local stories.

The best evidence for understanding the extent of the flood is the text of Genesis itself, although even here the language of Scripture is open to interpretation. In normal speech, a word or phrase can be used both literally and as an idiom, with either correct in any given situation. The same is true in the Bible. For example, the term *all*, which indicates how many high mountains on earth were covered by the floodwaters (Gen. 7:19) as well as the number of people whom God promises to never destroy by a flood again (Gen. 9:11), is used to refer to only a limited portion of the earth in Genesis 41:57: “All the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain.” Geographical terms in the Bible nearly always describe features within view of the author’s or characters’ own known world. In this case, “all the high mountains under the whole heaven” would indicate that the mountains which were covered with water were most reasonably those within the purview of Noah. Similarly, the geographical phrase “mountains of Ararat” on which the ark landed includes not just the highest peak labeled Ararat by modern cartographers but also the surrounding lower foothills and range (Gen. 8:4). The Hebrew term translated as *covered* (“all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered,” Gen. 7:19) can mean “drenched with” as is its sense in Malachi 2:13 (“You cover the LORD’s altar with tears”), as well as “submerged by.” And the Hebrew term for *earth* that is used repeatedly in the flood story is not *tevel*, meaning “globe,” but *eretz*, a word that can mean “earth” but typically just means “land,” something within the known world of those witnessing an event. On the other hand, the Hebrew term for the flood, *mabbul*, is something quite special, a word used only in the story of Noah and in Psalm 29:10. We get our English word *cataclysm* from the corresponding Greek term, *kataklysmos*, an indication that the flood was indeed cataclysmic for everyone involved, irrespective of its actual extent.

If we read the geographical terms in the story in a way that allows for a local rather than universal flood (which the language allows though doesn’t demand), then it seems likely that the flood was not meant to

kill everyone on earth but instead a number large enough to serve as an example to the rest. Then again, if the flood were local, why not just hike to the highest hill beyond its reach and skip the ark altogether? That, of course, wouldn't make for much of a story. The crux of the question "How big was the flood?" is one embedded in the biblical text itself, not the disciplines of archaeology or geology, and the significant issue is "Can the text be truthful either way?" Based on how all languages work, the answer has to be yes. For this reason, questions of theology or the inspiration of Scripture, including the understanding that Jesus had about the flood (Matt. 24:37–39), ought not be affected by the issue of the flood's physical extent.

To summarize, it seems as though the arguments advanced for either a universal flood or a local flood based on archaeology, geology, or the text of Genesis are not watertight. In principle, science should not dictate what a text (other than a scientific treatise) should or should not mean. Rather, science deals with physical realities about which a text can choose to speak on its own terms.

## Leaving the Ark GENESIS 8:1–19

**The flood stops, and as the waters begin to recede, the ark comes to rest on the mountains of Ararat. Noah sends a raven from the ark, then sends doves four times to see if they can find dry land. He, his family, and the animals leave the ark after the earth is dry.**

When God "remember[s]" Noah and all the animals on the ark (Gen. 8:1), he brings the floodwaters of divine judgment to an end. The ark runs aground "on the mountains of Ararat," a plural term that indicates the massive, rugged Ararat range which dominates the region of Lake Van in the eastern, Armenian, portion of Turkey (Gen. 8:4; cf. 2 Kings 19:37; Isa. 37:38; Jer. 51:27). The highest peak of the range, labeled Mount Ararat today, is 16,854 feet (5137 m) in elevation. Expeditions to find remains of the ark had already begun in antiquity. In the late first century AD,

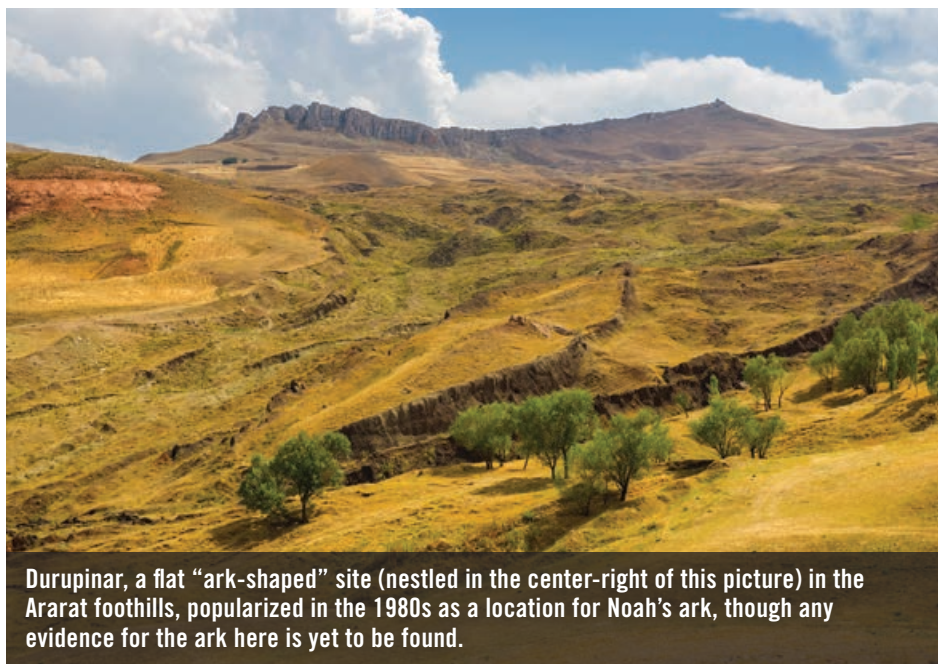
the Jewish historian Josephus mentioned several other Greek writers who reported that in his day the site of the ark was still known in the mountains of Armenia (eastern Turkey).<sup>7</sup> He added that the Armenians living there showed relics of the ark and that people would cart off pieces of its timber and bitumen as souvenirs. While it is not possible to verify these ancient accounts (they sound fanciful), pilots during World War II reported seeing the shape of an ark in the same general area, reviving interest in the hunt. Unstable political conditions, harsh landscapes, and a brutal climate have all conspired to hinder easy exploration, yet some who have braved the call claim, with great fanfare, to have found the remains of Noah's ark. None of these alleged sightings have been properly verified or gained general—not to mention scholarly—acceptance.

On the dove's third trip from the ark, it plucks a fresh leaf from an olive tree (Gen. 8:11). The olive tree is an evergreen and exceptionally hardy in that it can survive the harsh growing conditions found throughout the Middle East. It cannot, however, survive having been totally inundated for an entire year. Nor can this leaf have come from wholly new growth, since an olive seed needs several years to grow into a tree sufficiently leafed for a bird to be attracted to it. Both of these considerations, together with a recognition that there is nothing in the story that hints that the olive tree was preserved by a special miracle by God, suggest that the flood covered all of the land that was within the known world, or purview, of Noah, but not the entire globe.

Scientific considerations aside, what's more significant in the biblical storyline is what the olive leaf represents. Throughout the Bible the olive tree, its leaves, and its oil are indications of God's favor, blessing, life, and peace (e.g., Deut. 7:13; Judg. 9:9; Ps. 128:3; Isa. 61:3; Jer. 31:12). The God who created all life in Genesis 1 is the same God who brings forth new growth in Genesis 8—a new creation has dawned.



**Olives remain a dietary staple across the world of the Bible.**



## The Covenant GENESIS 8:20–9:17

**Noah builds an altar to the Lord and sacrifices animals on it. God makes a covenant with Noah that he will never again destroy all humanity by a flood, sealing it with the sign of a rainbow.**

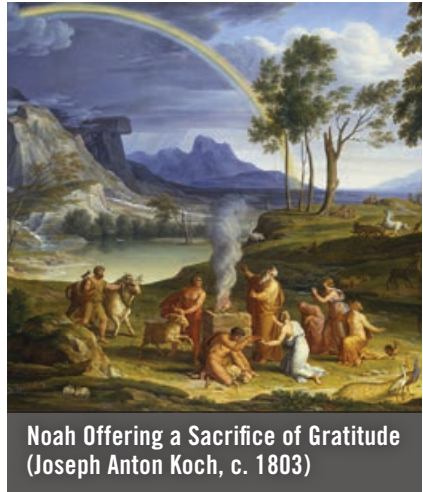
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As the story draws to a conclusion, we are struck broadside by Noah’s burnt offering. Those poor animals, saved only to be sacrificed! For an entire year they are cared for by Noah through a cataclysmic flood, only to be killed by him as soon as they leave the ark. Every other living thing finds a new home; they find death instead. Here the power of sacrifice, raw emotion mixed with the force of shed blood, is on full display. The world starts anew, but the human condition hasn’t changed. The time after the flood may well be re-creation, but it isn’t a return to Eden.

Many interpreters have understood God’s permission that Noah can eat animals, birds, and fish as an indication that prior to the flood, he

intended people to be vegetarians (Gen. 9:2–3; cf. 1:29–30). Others note that while at creation God gave plants as food to “everything that has the breath of life,” he didn’t specifically forbid either people or animals from eating meat (Gen. 1:30). The provision of plants as food doesn’t necessarily imply prohibition of animals as food. In any case, like the distinction between clean and unclean animals, God’s command in Genesis 9:4 that Noah “not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” is consistent with the laws of proper diet and food preparation given in Leviticus (Lev. 7:26; 17:10–13; 19:26). These provide a basis for kosher food laws observed by Jews still today.

Genesis 9:8–17 is the first use of the word *covenant* (*berit*) in the Bible. Although the details of the various covenants in the Old Testament differ, all carry the intent of restoring fellowship with people and bringing people back to God. The covenant in Noah’s story is an everlasting covenant, made with him by God on behalf of all humanity and hence detailing principles for life that are proper for everyone. Noah’s covenant focuses on the innate value of human life based on the realization that even after the flood, people are still made in the image of God (Gen. 9:6). In the Bible’s prophetic literature, the rainbow symbolizes the radiance and majesty of God and his angels (Ezek. 1:28; Rev. 4:3; 10:1). In the story of Noah, it is the visible seal of God’s covenant that he will not destroy all life on earth by flood again.



Noah Offering a Sacrifice of Gratitude  
(Joseph Anton Koch, c. 1803)

## Noah’s Shame GENESIS 9:18–29

**Noah plants a vineyard, gets drunk,  
and responds by cursing and blessing his sons.**

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The final episode in the Noah story shows that human sinfulness continues in spite of the judgments and blessings of God, and despite the second chance for life that is given to humanity after the flood. It sets the tone—and need—for the ongoing revelation of redemption that unfolds in the rest of the Bible.

While the story of Noah's nakedness and Ham's actions has received a great deal of attention in literature and preaching through the centuries—most of it focused on a variety of sordid behaviors—there is nothing in the text to suggest anything specific about what actually happened or what the motives of either Noah or his sons were. Nakedness in the Bible often indicates shame arising from something that already happened; it is generally not a condition to tempt people to sin. Nor can we conclude that Noah's curse of Ham's son Canaan, whatever its ramifications were at the time (Gen. 9:25; cf. 10:1, 15), carries implications for Canaan's descendants for all time in light of God's promise that all the peoples of the world can be blessed through Abraham (Gen. 12:3). What we do see in the story of Noah's nakedness is that the response of Ham, who sees and tattles about it, and that of Shem and Japheth who cover Noah up, represent the two choices that everyone makes when confronted with guilt and shame; it can be ignored, or absolved.



Mt. Ararat (background, right) towers over a vineyard in the Ararat valley.

## NOAH IN LATER WRITINGS

When later biblical writers mention Noah, they do so in the context of salvation from judgment to come. This supports the idea that the point of the story of Noah is not about details of the ark or the flood but about the character of God and his interaction with people. These and similar themes are frequent topics in early Jewish writings roughly contemporary with the Gospels:

- In the *Apocalypse of Adam*, Noah defends himself before God for giving birth to a line of descendants who were just as corrupt as those who perished in the flood.<sup>8</sup>
- In *1 Enoch*, God speaks to a Noah figure, Asuryal, and tells him to escape a coming flood by fleeing, rather than building an ark. The text then explains that the corrupt deeds that brought about the flood were done by people who had learned the secret powers of angels and demons.<sup>9</sup>
- The *Sibylline Oracles* includes a lengthy speech by Noah calling on everyone to repent of their wicked ways; here the misdeeds are more pedestrian: violence, shedding blood, drunkenness, anger, immodesty, adultery, and slander.<sup>10</sup>
- Pseudo-Philo specifies the kinds of judgments that God will bring about in latter days instead of another flood: famine, war, fire, death, earthquakes, and dispersion to uninhabited lands.<sup>11</sup>
- In the book of *Jubilees*, Noah is the first person to keep the feast of Weeks (Shavuot, or Pentecost) and the first one to use herbs for healing.<sup>12</sup>

In the New Testament, Noah serves as an example of salvation by faith and a warning about God's final judgment on humanity (Heb. 11:7; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5). As for the church fathers, Noah is often an example of obedience or a new Adam, a forerunner of Christ:

- Justin Martyr (second century AD) taught that Noah was a figure of Christ, someone who was saved to new life through water (the flood, and baptism), faith, and wood (the ark, and the cross).<sup>13</sup>
- John Chrysostom (fourth century AD) wrote that God chose Noah

because the conduct of his life showed him to be trustworthy with regard to all of God's commands.<sup>14</sup>

- Ambrose of Milan (fourth century AD) added that whereas many people may appear righteous by their deeds, God saw that Noah was indeed righteous because of the truth of his virtue and the purity of his soul.<sup>15</sup>

The trend to focus on these and similar themes has continued in classical English literature where all manner of Noah-like characterizations appear. For example, Noah becomes a carpenter who fears a second flood (Chaucer, *Miller's Tale*); a purveyor of judgment and logic (Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*); and, following the church fathers, a new Adam and type of Christ (Milton, *Paradise Lost*). More frequently, classical novelists have parodied Noah's drunkenness and fondness for wine (foibles make for juicier reading than right living). By comparison, treatises on how the biblical record relates to modern science with reference to the cause, extent, and results of the flood have appeared only in the last century.

## Study Questions

1. What are some ways that the story of Noah differs from flood stories of ancient Mesopotamia? What do these differences tell us about the nature and character of God?
2. Would your understanding of God's judgment and his grace be different if the events of the story of Noah happened today rather than in the distant past? If so, how?
3. Consider this statement: "God's reticence to act quickly is not a measure of his indifference or inability to act, but of his grace." When you think about today's world, do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
4. Do you think the flood was literally worldwide or far more localized? In terms of what the story of Noah teaches us about God and people, does it make a difference whether the flood was worldwide or local?
5. Give some examples of how modern retellings of the story of Noah have added to it to fill in some things the biblical author doesn't mention. Then give some examples of things that the author does mention which modern readers tend to skip over or ignore.
6. The story of Noah ends where it began, with human sinfulness and individual choice. What does this teach us about the nature and character of people—and of God?

## Chapter 1 Notes

- 1 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, i.74; *Sibylline Oracles* 1:147–198; Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 108b; and various writings of Augustine, among others.
- 2 Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 108b.
- 3 Many scholars suggest that the Noah story was written after the laws of clean and unclean foods were established and that he was then portrayed as keeping these laws in order to be considered fully righteous.
- 4 Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin*, 108b.
- 5 Augustine of Hippo, Question 6 on Genesis.
- 6 Sexagesimal (base 6) mathematics was used in ancient Babylon and by the Sumerians as early as the third millennium BC. Modern remnants include the 360-degree circle and the practice of dividing the hour into sixty minutes.
- 7 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, i.92–95.
- 8 *Apocalypse of Adam*, 3:11–16.
- 9 *1 Enoch* 10:1–3; 65:6.
- 10 *Sibylline Oracles*, 1:147–198.
- 11 Pseudo-Philo 3:9.
- 12 *Jubilees* 6:17–19; 10:10–13.
- 13 Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, CXXXVIII.
- 14 John Chrysostom, Homiletic 24 on Genesis.
- 15 Ambrose of Milan, *Noah and the Ark*, 11.37.

## Chapter 1 Images

*Noah's Ark on the Mount Ararat* by Simon de Myle, 1570

Gilgamesh Epic, Tablet 11, found on the citadel mound of Nineveh, The British Museum (Mike Peel/Wikimedia)

The Ancient Near East, satellite map courtesy of NASA

*Building the Ark* by James Tissot, c. 1896–1902, The Jewish Museum

*Noah Leading the Animals into the Ark* by Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione, c. 1645, National Gallery of Art

Tigris River (Lena Ha/Shutterstock)

Olive tree (Paul H. Wright)

Durupinar site, Agri Province, Turkey (Inna Giliarova/Shutterstock)

*Landscape with Noah Offering a Sacrifice of Gratitude* by Joseph Anton Koch, c. 1803, Städel Museum

Mount Ararat (Goinky Production/Shutterstock)